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Dialogue and mutual learning towards a low carbon society – experiences from 10 countries across Europe

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Abstract

The newest solutions and developments for a low carbon society could be more easily implemented if mutual learning and exchange about sustainable ideas and solutions could take place, highlighting the benefit of cooperation for the transformation of the energy system. Societal dialogue can be a key for such exchange and learning to occur. A challenge is how to get substantial and inclusive involvement of all stakeholders, whose vested interests are often not aligned. The EC FP7 R&Dialogue project is exploring the potential of dialogue in tackling this challenge and in promoting innovative energy strategies. The project, which spans ten European countries, is conducting research to increase understanding of the different viewpoints and related interests, with the goal of merging them to facilitate the creation of a low-carbon society.

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1. Creating a space for dialogue on a low carbon society

The R&Dialogue project (2012-2015), funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme, aims to improve dialogue between Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Research and Development Organisations (RDOs) on the development of renewable energies and carbon capture and storage (CCS) for a low carbon society. While the goal of reducing CO₂ emissions is set in a number of important documents at the European level (e.g. the 2020 targets [1], the 2050 roadmap [2], and the 2030 Climate and Energy package [3]) member states have so far been hesitant to transpose them into national policies, and uncertainty characterises the European energy scenario with regard to how these goals can be achieved. Transitioning towards a low carbon society is a complex and long-term task about which the numerous stakeholders hold a variety of perspectives. Transition management has strongly emerged as an approach for addressing complex societal problems and governance aspects related to sustainability. In short, it is a participatory learning and experimenting process aimed at creating a societal movement that can put pressure on policy development [4, 5]. Dialogue towards a common view on energy transition is therefore crucial for improving cohesion and unity of intents for the European energy system, within a framework that respects the choices of each country. R&Dialogue has started to work on a social process meant to facilitate the interaction between organisations from the different sectors of society, establishing a relationship where exchange and mutual learning can take place and collaboration develop.

Looking more in detail into the societal challenge that the European Commission (EC) has encouraged us to address through a “more dynamic governance of the science and society relationship” as implemented through the so-called “Mobilisation and Mutual Learning (MML) action plans” [6], we can better identify the “human” side of the already complex technological transition. While in principle the need for a low carbon society is widely recognised, difficulties often arise when it comes to implementation. As stated in the EC call to which the project answered: “The overarching rationale for developing low carbon energy technologies, including carbon capture and sequestration technologies, is well established: we must find “cleaner” energy sources and ways for dealing with their potential environmental impacts. However, the technological solutions that are proposed might not be considered desirable in the specific environments in which they could be deployed. Technologically appealing solutions might miss key socio-economic considerations and elicit public hostility or disinterest” [6]. In other words, the success of implementing technologies depends on people and how people, institutions, and organisations relate to the technologies and with one another. Furthermore, technology in itself is not enough for the transition to take place; changes in perspectives and models of collaboration and new institutional mechanisms may be needed. In this context, policy makers feel the urgency of the energy transition, but recognise that the level of support that they can count on from the different sectors of society is uncertain. There is no common view on such important issues as energy strategies and environmental protection, and in many cases there is little or no direct communication and exchange of views amongst the different stakeholders. The lack of communication between research and civil society results in, among other things, a scarce influence of civil society on initial research agendas, whereas at a later stage large investments in technology development and implementation can be blocked by opposing citizens. Therefore “understanding the nature of various public concerns (e.g. environmental, ethical, economic, cultural, etc.), and taking on board legitimate expectations should influence the relevant research and lead to more broadly supported solutions” [6]. R&Dialogue is researching these concerns and expectations with the goal of improving dialogue between the various stakeholders. With this, the project hopes to facilitate the creation of a joint vision of what it takes to build a low carbon society with public support, which is quickly becoming the key to a successful energy transition.

But why is dialogue needed in our society and why does it require preparation? William Isaacs [7] explains dialogue as being a “natural” language for humans that in our modern world, where opportunities and social spaces for practicing it have gradually disappeared, does not come natural any more. We are confronted with a situation in which the structure of societal relationships has enormously reduced the possibility for people to have the kind of exchange where new ideas can sprout as a result of meeting others and where collective thinking can take place to solve common problems. This is increasingly being recognised as a social problem and policy approaches have also started to take into account the role of dialogue in deliberation processes [8]. Dialogue allows “the open exploration of worldviews, value frames, experiences and assumptions” [8 p.60], which is an important aspect that is largely missing in the current discussions over energy options. An essential characteristic of dialogue formats is that they

“strive to build safe spaces for dissention and difference, and to foster the creation of shared meaning on the basis of disparate forms of knowing and experiencing” [8 p.60]. So while awareness about the importance of dialogue is spreading, there is still limited understanding about how to achieve it and lack of recognised spaces where it can take place. This is the starting point for R&Dialogue, which is implementing an innovative psychosocial-based framework to both improve understanding of the difficulties that people may meet when attempting social dialogue on energy issues and to create appropriate spaces for this specific kind of social exchange to occur.

2. The method

The framework for dialogue developed within the R&Dialogue project is inspired by the Demand Analysis research intervention approach [9, 10, 11, 12, 13]. This approach focuses on social relationships from a psychodynamic and cultural point of view. It examines how they can develop depending on the objectives people share within a given social context. Such understanding can raise people’s awareness of the relationship they experience, what they want from it and how they can define, achieve or transform common objectives. This is done by matching the explicit and rational dimensions of the interaction (such as thematic contents) with the elaboration of social emotional dimensions [14]. This may help people achieve new insights or discover new perspectives on the given topic and thus can help elaborate and overcome bottlenecks or loosen emotional entanglements that often block dialogue.

One method being used in the project to identify emotionally relevant areas related to dialogue on a low carbon society is the Emotional Text Analysis - ETA [15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21]. ETA is a psychological tool designed for systematic work on the emotional substratum, which drives our collective choices. With ETA we approach a written text to uncover emotional dimensions, through the clues given by emotionally relevant words, giving time, space and attention to what people feel as a community. ETA involves the collection of texts (which are an expression of the social context of interest) the analysis and interpretation of these texts (with software support), and the eventual communication and discussion of the outcomes with the community. We say that the ETA results speak of the “local culture”, of the representation of the topic being studied by the people who have produced the text. Each word in the text is examined and selected for its “emotional density”. The words that are included in the analysis are clues of the emotional dimensions felt by the social group that produced the text with reference to the topic. It can be useful to remember that we are speaking of collective emotions - even though they go through individuals, they are common to all participants.

3. Structure of the project

The scheme of the Mobilisation and Mutual Learning Action Plans (MMLAP) asks for dialogue and participatory learning: it “forges partnerships between research organisations and different societal actors. It develops forms of dialogue and cooperation between science and society at different stages of the research process” [5]. A key feature of such a scheme is that “the forms of dialogue and cooperation between the partners should be based on a participatory and mutual learning approach” [5, p.7]. In designing the project we thus provided it with a structure that would enable the project consortium, consisting of researchers, consultants and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the field of energy, to start a dialogue process in ten European countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom). Two important areas of activity had to be included: direct dialogue with stakeholder organisations in each of the ten European countries; and internal dialogue and training to prepare the consortium partners for the implementation of the dialogue action in their respective countries.

With this in mind, we have set up R&Dialogue in a way that fosters an open exchange of ideas, views, and thoughts. The structure of the project includes activities at the level of the ten national contexts and common activities for all consortium partners on: social process, interaction with European stakeholders, European integration of the national outcomes, and communication.

The workflow starts from internal preparation, which runs throughout the project and comprises activities on the partners’ motivations, objectives, and relationship with the external stakeholders, as well as activities to widen the perspective and knowledge of project members about energy issues beyond their known working environment. It

then continues with the establishment of relationships with national energy and civil society stakeholders and the creation of a National Dialogue Council as a way of creating a base for dialogue. The dialogue then develops first within the group of organisations participating in the dialogue and then more widely nationally with the proposition of a Discussion Paper. Finally the whole experience converges in the formulation of a vision towards a low carbon society that is shared by the National Dialogue Council participants. The ten national vision papers are to be integrated at the European level and brought to the attention of national, European and international policymakers and the public at large.

4. Experiencing stakeholders' dialogue in ten countries across Europe

Preparing the project consortium: The R&Dialogue consortium is a diverse set of organisations and people to reflect the diversity we meet in society: engineers, technical researchers, social researchers, NGOs, consultants, etc. Thus the project has first created a space for internal dialogue and cooperation. We have gone through a process of internal dialogue that has helped each national team to facilitate the same process within each national dialogue council, allowing the consortium members to learn by doing. In the consortium we have conducted creative sessions to establish shared views on the low carbon society, the framework for the work to be done, the definition and role of dialogue, innovative formats for the dialogue, and to reflect on successful and failed dialogues.

Listening to and elaboration of stakeholders perspectives: At the beginning of the national dialogues all the stakeholders were given the opportunity to express their points of views, based on which the partners have organised the subsequent activities to fit with the main interests emerging from the interviews. Emotionally dense texts have been produced in the context of the relationships within the consortium and with the national and European stakeholders. 51 interviews with consortium partners, over 400 interviews at the national level (on average 40 interviews in each country) and 21 interviews at the European level have been undertaken and are currently being analysed with ETA. These interviews are being analysed to identify emotional and cultural dimensions that characterise each national dialogue. The interviews, which invited the interviewees to speak freely around one key question, provided both input for ETA and a key moment for the establishment of a relationship with the stakeholders. Taking the time to pause and reflect over energy and dialogue issues proved very useful: for the stakeholders to be able to fully express their perspective and for the partners to bring to the relationship a listening mode, which is of great value in dialogue. As Isaacs puts it: "The heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen" [7, p.108]. The development of the protocol for the interviews was an important moment within the consortium, as this standardised approach will bring insight into stakeholders' perspectives and allow their systematic understanding through ETA.

Setting up national dialogue councils: following the principles of dialogue, partners realised the consortium was insufficient to develop ideas of how countries should use dialogue towards the low carbon society. This needs to be done by and with the stakeholders taking part in national dialogue councils. With the experience of the consortium partners, the knowledge base on low carbon energy and dialogues, and with the support of ETA, the national dialogue councils have a solid base to start their work. The national dialogue councils are now (summer, 2014) fully operational.

5. Main results achieved so far

The first result of the work on the social process has been the development of a coordinated, common approach for engaging the stakeholders, which will contribute to an interesting comparison of the ten countries' dialogue processes. This has been achieved through a gradual agreement via a "learning by doing" approach to the dialogue. The work has also resulted in an aligned project consortium that is comfortable in sharing experiences, ideas and thoughts on the project.

Thanks to such cooperative interaction the partners are sharing, discussing and jointly co-creating the project's outcomes, such as the project's key communication messages (which have been translated into communication materials: website - www.rndialogue.eu - blogs, leaflet, position paper, presentation, branding/graphic design, templates, LinkedIn and Twitter accounts) and the formats for inventories that support the exploration of the energy context at various levels (based on the analysis and elaboration of the most relevant visions and perspectives

expressed by participants at the consortium, national and European levels).

From the point of view of the stakeholders' representations and perspectives on the dialogue towards a low carbon-society, important learning points that are emerging are:

- there is a remoteness of energy technologies and related decision making that needs to be dealt with. Energy production and its challenges are felt as a world separate from more social dimensions: dialogue needs to include people to support really constructive developments, with the participation of all stakeholders;
- there is a common desire of stakeholders to educate and inform. However, learning about energy options and strategies requires motivation and interest, which at the moment are being hindered by the very limited involvement of people in the energy decision-making processes;
- a new social model seems to be emerging that could overcome the separation between economic and ecological aspects of the energy system;
- efforts by local, national and European institutions are required to create regulations that are capable of truly integrating, in a big picture, the interdependences of the European and global energy markets;
- nations who can count on their own internal energy resources seem to be more at ease in managing the energy transition, seeing it not just as a necessity but also as an opportunity for innovation. Mutual learning efforts should be done to share this important cultural dimension with the other countries.

A result already available is the message that stakeholders across Europe acknowledge the need for an open, trusted space for dialogue towards a low carbon society, one that is currently lacking. They recognise that the dialogue as implemented by the R&Dialogue project may help to fulfil such a need.

In terms of concrete measures R&Dialogue has had up to now a meaningful and wide engagement with over 1,300 people from targeted stakeholder groups:

- 400 interviews at the national level;
- 21 interviews at the European level and approximately 370 European stakeholders receive the periodic newsletter;
- 125 council members directly participating in the national councils. Most of them are high-profile representatives from RDOs and CSOs: board-level and/or national opinion makers from NGOs, industries, public authorities, media, investors and others;
- 170 people reached within our own organisations (17 partners, around 10 internal stakeholders per partner); and 49 of them interviewed;
- approximately 400 people reached via national and European events;
- efforts have been made to also reach the general public, such as through participation to events like the European Year of the Citizen social media event. This allowed R&Dialogue first-hand access to citizen engagement and sparked several interesting conversations over Facebook, Google+ and Twitter.

6. Preliminary conclusions and the way ahead

The R&Dialogue project aims to engage researchers and Civil Society Organisations in a dialogue for co-creating solutions to energy challenges. Creating the right environment for a dialogue requires time, effort, and method. Although the project is only half way through its implementation, the experience up to now looks promising. The consideration and elaboration of socio-emotional factors is showing its potential for understanding energy challenges and is helping the partners and the stakeholders to find the way for an effective dialogue in which people speak, listen, and discuss in a productive way. This social process increases the likelihood of efficient coordination of the community efforts. Dialogue and technological innovation are interconnected. New ideas and technologies need dialogue to be selected, developed, and implemented. Dialogue with civil society helps researchers better direct their work.

From a research perspective, the application of the Demand Analysis approach and of Emotional Text Analysis to ten different European countries opens new avenues for psychosocial research intervention, which could later be useful for a pan-European exploration of societal dimensions in energy related issues.

The National Dialogue Councils are on their way to building a vision of a low carbon society. Mutual learning is happening in the project at multiple levels: in the consortium, among stakeholders and among countries. In the national dialogue councils we have noticed an enthusiasm, which hopefully will support continuation of the efforts

beyond the official project end.

Along the way towards a low carbon society, we aim to widely disseminate the project's experiences and results at the national, European and international level, seeking interaction in the spirit of the dialogue definition that we have jointly agreed: "Dialogue is an environment where two or more people exchange, communicate, and understand different feelings, perspectives and points of view, through an open, fair and respectful process and cooperation, because the use of low carbon technologies is a societal challenge".

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